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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 001019

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ES  
SUBJECT: VIOLENCE IN EL SALVADOR 1: THE STATISTICS

REF: SAN SALVADOR 987

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: This cable is the first in a series addressing violent crime in El Salvador. Crime levels have risen sharply in 2009. Surveys rank public security as the top problem in El Salvador, even though the country is in the midst of its worst economic downturn in more than a decade. Although the crime numbers are closely watched, crime experts say the country's statistics are wholly unreliable and subject to political manipulation. They believe the country needs an independent, reliable source for crime statistics to help depoliticize the numbers, calm public fear, and bring objective analysis to the study of violent crime. End summary.

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CRIME STATS STRATOSPHERIC, REALITY STILL HIGHER  
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¶2. (SBU) Based on the rate through mid-October, El Salvador is on pace to register 4,361 homicides this year ) equal to 76.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, a 37 percent increase from 2008. That makes the country's homicide rate the highest in Latin America; it is more than three times the rate in Mexico, twice that of Colombia, and ten times the world average. The homicide count is the only crime statistic for which the government has a system for generating reliable numbers. Three government agencies ) the National Civilian Police, Attorney General and Medical Examiner ) meet regularly to compile homicide figures. Abby Cordova, a USAID-funded pollster studying Salvadoran crime statistics, told PolOff that while the count is reliable, the details ) particularly the location of the homicides ) lack the precision necessary to design an effective security strategy.

¶3. (SBU) The homicide count is so closely watched by the public that it has become a political football. Under pressure to address public concerns, Public Security Minister Manuel Melgar recently disavowed the official homicide count, claiming the true number of killings since he took office in June was much lower. However, according to Abby Cordova, the official homicide count probably understates reality because it only includes recovered bodies. The dozens of missing persons reported every month are only included in homicide statistics once the bodies are discovered. However, many of the missing are never found. An October 26 report in the newspaper El Mundo noted that authorities have discovered 20 mass graves containing 84 bodies so far this year.

¶4. (SBU) Other crime statistics also show a notable spike in 2009. However, Rafal Pleitez, a crime expert at FUSADES, a well-regarded Salvadoran think tank, told PolOff that while these statistics probably reflect the underlying reality of a real rise in all types of crime, they are not rigorously defined, nor are they the product of systematic, intra-agency collaboration like the homicide count. Pleitez said all crime numbers except the homicide count are unreliable.

15. (SBU) Even if statistics were reliable, Pleitez said they would still understate real crime levels due to widespread under-reporting by crime victims. FUSADES victimization studies in 2006 and 2008 concluded that more than two out of every three robberies are never reported to the police. Pleitez said he believes that sexual assault, extortion, and other crimes suffer similar levels of under-reporting. If true, real crime levels (with the exception of homicides, which experts agree are not under-reported) could be three times what official statistics indicate.

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CRIME PERCEPTION ALSO RISING; PARANOIA SETTING IN  
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16. (U) The public perception of insecurity has also increased. According to surveys by the University Public Opinion Institute (IUDOP), a polling agency affiliated with the left-leaning Central American University, the percentage of people who believe public security is the country's number one problem rose from 13 percent in 2008 to 48 percent in 2009. The same poll indicated 59 percent of the population believes crime is rising, versus only 15 percent who say it is falling. These polls were conducted in June, before the highly publicized increase in homicides reported in September and October.

17. (SBU) The growing perception of insecurity has led to notable incidents of public paranoia. On October 19, a hoax email about an imminent gang-imposed curfew in San Salvador prompted hundreds of businesses to close early and brought evening traffic to a stand-still. Similar rumors of gang-imposed curfews also occurred in July, but did not provoke the widespread panic seen on October 19. FUSADES's Pleitez told PolOff that "when the public is poorly informed (about crime), they resort to this sort of gossip and rumor."

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CIVIL SOCIETY, OPPOSITION WANT INDEPENDENT CRIME STATS  
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18. (SBU) Pleitez told PolOff that El Salvador needs an independent agency to generate reliable crime statistics. He said the agency could compile crime data and conduct regular victimization surveys to eliminate under-reporting. He emphasized that such an agency must be staffed with technical experts who are insulated from political interference in order to gain public confidence. PolOff recently met with an ARENA legislator and a representative from the UN Development Programme who also suggested forming an independent crime statistics agency in El Salvador.

19. (C) Comment: Unreliable crime statistics inhibit the development of an effective anti-crime strategy, are subject to political manipulation, and foster an environment of public fear. A comprehensive strategy, aimed at winning back public confidence, must necessarily include reliable statistics, and also a reliable means of informing the public. End Comment.

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